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## The Gnostic Gospel of Mary Magdalene, by James Bean



SantMat in Sant Mat Meditation and Spirituality

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Mosaic found at the 6th century Monastery of Lady Mary in Beit She'an, Israel — A sun god, moon goddess surrounded by the twelve signs of the zodiac, and yet simultaneously, given the monastic context, reinterpreted or adapted as also Jesus, Mary Magdalene and the Twelve Apostles?

## Introduction

The Gospel of Mary Magdalene is in a genre of literature known as "apocryphal writings", "extra-canonical scriptures", "Gnostic gospels", "lost books of the Bible", "Dead Sea Scrolls", etc... In some cases these are books once viewed as scripture by many around the Roman Empire in Christianity but were later dropped and disappeared from sight, such as the Book of First Enoch, Letters of Clement, Letter of Barnabas, Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter, the Didache, and Odes of Solomon. To this day, the Ethiopian Bible contains a total of eighty one books, more than any other present-day Bible. And there were dozens and scores of additional writings, never known to, or embraced by, European Christianity but were nevertheless read as scripture by various indigenous spiritual communities located in North Africa, the Middle and Near East, all the way to China. These are writings composed long ago by Jewish and Christian authors and were used as scripture by lesser-known religious sects of antiquity such as the Essenes, the vegetarian or Ebionite Christians, the Saint Thomas Church of the East, Valentinian Gnostics, the Sethians, Manichaeans, Nestorians, or other expressions of early Christianity based in Israel, Syria/Mesopotamia, Turkey, Egypt, Greece, Armenia, Iran, along the Silk Road, India, and China. Indeed, many other collections of the sayings of Jesus, fascinating gospel accounts, letters, revelations, psalms and spiritual discourses have been preserved. One can easily purchase translations of them, or read them online for free.

Think of all these documents, both the more familiar New Testament and the other apocryphal scriptures, as being like pieces of a puzzle. If we combine these pieces together, a larger, more colorful, diverse, amazing, and spiritually satisfying picture starts to emerge. Rather than being ignored, the rich spiritual heritage of Christianity in all of these cultures should be celebrated. There's a vast amount of spiritual wisdom and inspiration in many of these sacred texts, including the Gospel of Mary Magdalene.

Scholars analyzing the internal clues provided by the text itself generally have the view that the Gospel of Mary Magdalene (GofMM) was composed sometime during the late first or early second centuries AD, perhaps in Syria, which was home to many fascinating Jewish and Christian communities in antiquity. A large number of "gnostic" or mystical scriptures were composed in Greek, and eventually made their way from Syria to Egypt, where monks copied them into Coptic, the language of Egyptian Christianity.

We don't have much information about "the Mary Magdalene community", if you will -- the spiritual group that once valued the GofMM as one of its scriptures, other than what can be observed in the contents of the book. It presents Mary as not only equal to her male counterparts as an apostolic leader in early Christianity, but also perhaps as the widow of Christ -- wife of the guru, and his primary spiritual successor with the most complete understanding of Christ's message. Mary also described visions of the radiant form of her Master, the resurrected Christ.

Some teachings presented within the GofMM have a familiar "Eastern" ring to them, very much at home in the esoteric tradition of contemplative mysticism. These include the understanding that our real identity is the inner self, soul or spirit, that in addition to the inner self and the material body, human beings also possess several subtle bodies, including three levels of mind. The goal is for the soul to ascend through several heavens, rising above above the realms of mind and matter, ultimately entering into spiritual rest.

"The rediscovery of the Gospel of Mary restores a fragment of this heritage from early Christian history and theology." (The Complete Gospels, edited by Robert J. Miller) The edition of the GofMM found in, The Complete Gospels, no doubt provides the best translation available, since it combines together all three of the surviving manuscripts that have been discovered thus far, two in Greek, and one in Coptic. All three however are quite damaged. Some chapters remain missing. Hopefully, another copy of this ancient book will be found one day.

"Mary stood up, greeted them all, and said to her brethren, Do not weep and do not grieve nor be irresolute, for His grace will be entirely with you and will protect you.

"But rather, let us praise His greatness, for He has prepared us and made us into Men [their gnostic term for 'spiritual beings'].

"When Mary said this, she turned their hearts to the Good, and they began to discuss the words of the Savior.

"Peter said to Mary, Sister we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of woman.

“Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember which you know, but we do not, nor have we heard them.

“Mary answered and said, What is hidden from you I will proclaim to you.” (Gospel of Mary)

“Thou art blessed before all women on the earth, because thou shalt be the fullness of all fullnesses and the perfection of all perfections.” (Yeshua to Mary Magdalene in the Book of Pistis Sophia)

Were Mary Magdalene and Yeshua Married?

As I begin this exploration of the teachings of Mary Magdalene, also known as Miriam of Magdala I should first of all address the question of Mary's relationship with Yeshua (Jesus). You might be interested in the actual historic basis for the belief that Mary and Jesus were married or at least were more than friends. While there has been much speculation about this over the years, there is an actual ancient text which preserves this understanding, showing that as far back as the Second Century AD, probably much earlier than that, many held the view that Jesus and Mary had some kind of special or intimate relationship. The text that documents the basis for this view is called the Gospel of Philip, one of the newly discovered gospels unearthed at Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt. At Gnosis.org you can access the Gospel of Philip online. Philip is a holy book once used by a denomination known as the Valentinians, named after a mystic and spiritual Master from Alexandria by the name of Valentinus.

Several places in the book of Philip Mary Magdalene is described as “the companion” of Christ, saying that Yeshua loved Mary, was closer to Mary than the other disciples, and also records that Yeshua used to often kiss Mary on her mouth. Actually that last part: “often kiss Mary on the... [mouth]”, is a restoration of the text, is likely what it said according to Coptic scholars. On this page of Phillip in the original Coptic papyrus it reads: “used to kiss her often on her [.....]”, then there is a lacuna or break in the text with the last word missing. Given the other comments from the disciples, who asked: “Why do you love her more than us”, and that Mary is “his companion”, I would say this is likely to be an accurate rendering. Also, the surrounding context in the Gospel of Philip is about marriage, the bridal chamber, and sexuality. Sacraments, in particular the sacrament of marriage, are a major theme in the Gospel of Philip.

Books On Mary Magdalene

Some great books on this subject include: The Gospel of Philip, Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and the Gnosis of Sacred Union; The Sacred Embrace of Jesus and Mary – The Sexual Mystery at the Heart of the Christian Tradition, both authored by Jean-Yves Leloup, and both are published by Inner Traditions. A very key book to have, one that gathers together many of the ancient texts and quotes attributed to Mary is: The Gospels of Mary – The Secret Tradition of Mary Magdalene the Companion of Jesus, by Marvin Meyer and Esther A. De Boer, Harper Collins. I find the best translation of the Gospel of Mary Magdalene to be contained in, The Complete Gospels, edited by Robert J. Miller, a great collection of what survives of around twenty gospels from antiquity. The largest number of chapters attributed to Mary, a series of questions of Mary to Jesus along with her mystical interpretation of the Hebrew Book of Psalms and another work known as the Odes of Solomon, can be found in a holy book called, Pistis Sophia, translated by G.R.S. Mead.

A Gnostic-Buddhist Connection?

The phrase “the Blessed One” appears in the Gospel of Mary Magdalene:

“When the Blessed One had said this, he greeted them all, saying, ‘Peace be with you. Receive my peace to yourselves’”.

The thing is, the Buddha is referred to as the Blessed One in countless Buddhist sutras. “Compassionate One” is a popular Buddhist phrase and somehow also turns up in Pistis Sophia, another Gnostic gospel:

“Jesus, the Compassionate, answered and said to Mary: ‘Mary, thou Blessed One, whom I will complete in all the Mysteries of the Height [inner planes or heavenly realms], speak openly, thou art she whose heart is more directed to the Kingdom of Heaven than all thy brothers.’”

And Mary herself is also called a “Blessed One” in another verse of Pistis Sophia:

“Mary, thou Blessed One, thou Pleroma [Heavenly Fullness] or thou all-blessed Pleroma, who will be blessed among all generations”.

Those are the ones I have noticed, and I’m sure there must be more. These four examples could make one wonder if perhaps there might have been a slight Buddhist influence in the West during those days.

#### Other “Eastern” Sounding Mystical Teachings of Mary Magdalene

A saying of Yeshua found in the Gospel of Mary:

“When the Blessed One had said this, he greeted them all. ‘Peace be with you!’ he said. ‘Acquire my peace within yourselves. Be on your guard so that no one deceives you by saying, ‘Look over here!’ or ‘Look over there!’ For the Seed of True Humanity exists within you. Follow it! Those who search for it will find it.”

Some commentary found in a footnote of the same translation adds:

“The disciples must search within themselves, to find the Seed of True Humanity that is within each person. They must guard against those who try to lead them astray by requiring that a person conform to what is outside.” (The Complete Gospels, Robert J. Miller)

Regarding “the Seed of True Humanity”, another translation renders that as “Son of Man” or “Son of Adam”, “the Son of Man is within you.” The Eastern term is “atman”, the true self or Spirit of Life within.

For the mystic-soul there is no need to construct outward temples made of wood and stone, as the human body itself is already a temple of the Spirit. I’m sure this “within you” message of the Gnostic or mystical gospels is one of the reasons why they were not politically useful to some in antiquity, and thus they were banned. The saying above reflects a theme found in the teachings of countless mystics and Masters, that the focus is “within”, not elsewhere in the outer world of the five senses. Thus contemplative meditation for mystics serves as a kind of “portal” or “doorway” to the Divine.

In the poetry of the Indian mystic Dadu it says:

“God is within the self; He is close to the worshiper. But leaving Him aside, men serve external constructions, lamenteth Dadu. This is the mosque, this is the temple, so has the Master shown. The service and salutation are performed within. With happiness and bliss within, there is happiness and bliss in all places. Without happiness and bliss within, none was seen happy. The treasure is nowhere to be found, that treasure is within everyone. There are two hearts inside, one obscure and the other lustrous. Within the obscure heart nothing is visible, but within the lustrous the Supreme Being is revealed. I found the true home within the house itself. Entering the state of blissful meditation, dwell within. Thus hath the Master discovered and taught. For the sake of that home, I wandered everywhere, but the Lord has been revealed within my very self. The doors of the palace have been thrown open, the Everlasting Abode has been shown. All fears, doubts and delusions have disappeared. That state of bliss has it entered, where the self, transcending the body, ascends.” (Sant Dadu Dayal, Criterion Publications, New Delhi)

Mary was an apostle or Master who was a visionary, one who saw many visions of various inner planes or heavenly regions during her meditations. A beautiful passage from the Gospel of Mary about a soul Mary saw during one of her visions when she was exploring the Second Heaven. This soul was being questioned by a being or power given the name “Desire”:

“The soul answered saying, You did not see me nor did you know me. You mistook the garment I wore for my true self. And you did not recognize me.”

There is a similar passage in one of the Mandaean Gnostic texts from Iraq that goes something like:

“The soul says, ‘I dwelt in your midst but you never recognized me, you never really knew me.’”

How easy it is to only see the surface, to in fact be wasting away whole lifetimes being a surface-dweller, neither knowing one's self nor seeing the true identity of others as souls. In truth we are all particles of Light dwelling within bodies, we are Notes that make up a divine symphony:

“All beautiful forms and tones of this world are mere reflections of some aspect of that ultimate Love-Music of the Great Creative Word. Within the vast complex of creation, each individual spirit is himself/herself a spark of that Eternal Song of Love.” (George Arnsby Jones)

In Gnostic scriptures such as the Gospel of Mary, unenlightened human existence is portrayed as a kind of night of the living dead, souls living in a world of sleep caught up in dreams of illusion, trapped in spiritual ignorance somewhere in time, limited to only a couple of dimensions, tethered to material existence seemingly unable to become aware of anything more. One of my favorite passages from Mary is when a liberated soul exclaims:

“I was set loose from a world and from the chain of forgetfulness that exists in time!”

Another “Mary” further to the East by the name Mira Bai once said,

“My mind, birth after birth,  
lost in slumber,  
Awoke on hearing the Sound  
my Master gave.”

One Edition of the Gospel of Mary Online:

<http://www.gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm>